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By Keith Cameron

OUT OF THE WOODS

Behind an 1850's Virginia farmhouse sits Static King, the recording studio where Mark Linkous made the first two Sparklehorse albums. We are not looking at the most luxurious facility in the world. In fact, it's by no means unfair to describe Static King as a small wooden shack that's been filled with recording equipment. Until quite recently, it was also home to a spider.

'How big? Real big' Mark nods gravely, holding up his hand by way of illustration. 'Poisonous, too, I think'. After several days vain quest, Mark eventually cornered his eight-legged foe and set him free in the woods. End of story, he thought. One week later, Static King resounded to the patter of myriad baby arachnid feet. Mark Linkous had himself a serious arachnid problem.

'Well' he chuckles 'I could hardly ask Nina and Polly to come out here and risk getting spider-bitten. Even I don't like spiders too much'.

So it was that Mark Linkous went to Polly Jean Harvey and Nina Persson - in Barcelona and New York, respectively - to record their vocal contributions to It's A Wonderful Life, the new Sparklehorse album and first to be made beyond his Virginia backyard. Officially, Mark lives in Dillwyn, a dusty 'town' one hour's drive west of Richmond, the state capital, that barely registers a pin-prick on the most detailed maps of the USA.

In actual fact, he lives miles from Dillwyn, at the end of a long wooded drive, surrounded by flora and fauna of many exotic stripes, shapes and sounds. At the Sparklehorse homestead, we also meet four dogs, two cats, two horses, and Teresa, Mark's wife. Oh, and we should not forget the toad which shares a garage with Mark's collection of motorcycles.

'And this is a metropolis compared to where I'm from and where Teresa's from. It's down there. Yeah, people come here and say how quiet it is. I'm just used to it. If you equate it with the music, I think things being this quiet, other things become more apparent'. In spite of an episodic gestation process at various locations and involving numerous outside collaborators, It's A Wonderful Life is actually the least schizophrenic, most cohesive album Linkous has made, rife with the sensual bucolic mysticism redolent of friends and kindred spirits Mercury Rev and Grandaddy.

'There's a sense of peacefulness in the content' agrees Mark, nursing a white Russian on the porch, as the family of frogs who reside in his swimming pool choirs merrily to the star-strewn night. 'I was talking to Jason [Lytle, Grandaddy] about how recording's our jobs and just how much pleasure it was to maybe sit on the porch and play guitar and have the sound reverberate, go off into wherever and eventually evaporate. Beautiful. Just not have any expectations. I was trying to get that back again'.